

**XUAN LOC: THE FINAL BATTLE
VIETNAM, 1975**

A Paper
presented
to
the

Popular Culture Association
April 19-22, 2000

New Orleans, Louisiana

by

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On 30 April 1975, North Vietnamese tanks rumbled through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon and the Vietnam War was over. The purpose of this paper is to examine the events that led up to the defeat of South Vietnam, focusing on the last fifty-five days of the conflict. It will address the final battle fought at Xuan Loc, but will also consider the final battle lost by the Ford Administration in the U.S. Congress that sealed the fate of South Vietnam.

The Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973, but this did not end the war in Vietnam. Under the provisions of the agreement, a cease-fire was initiated and the United States agreed to a total withdrawal of all troops, advisers, and other military personnel from South Vietnam within sixty days. Unfortunately, the Accords did not address the estimated 150,000 North Vietnamese (NVA, as they were known by most Americans, but more correctly, PAVN – People's Army of Vietnam) troops that remained in South Vietnam.¹ For the United States, the war was over, but for the South Vietnamese, the cease-fire was but a momentary lull that preceded a move into the next phase of the war against the Communists – one in which they would have to stand alone without any assistance from the United States.

When the cease-fire went into effect, the South Vietnamese controlled most of the populated parts of South Vietnam, but the PAVN occupied the extreme north and northwestern part of Military Region I south of the DMZ, northwestern Kontum Province in the Central Highlands, and parts of Phuoc Long Province and northern Binh Long Province in Military Region III along the Cambodian border.

After a brief period of calm following the cease-fire, intense fighting broke out all over South Vietnam as both sides vied for control of contested territory. U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker later wrote, quoting a U.S. pacification official in Lam Dong Province, that the "cease-fire appeared to have initiated a new war, more intense and more brutal than the last."² In the first three weeks after the official cessation of hostilities, there were over three thousand violations of the cease-fire.

Alarmed at the continuation of the fighting, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu went to the United States to confer with President Nixon in early April 1973. Thieu found the American president "preoccupied and absent minded" during the meeting, but Nixon reiterated previous promises to support Saigon and spoke of renewed military aid at the "one billion dollar level."³ Nixon, however, had other more pressing problems. The Watergate scandal was picking up momentum and the president was distracted by the mounting controversy.

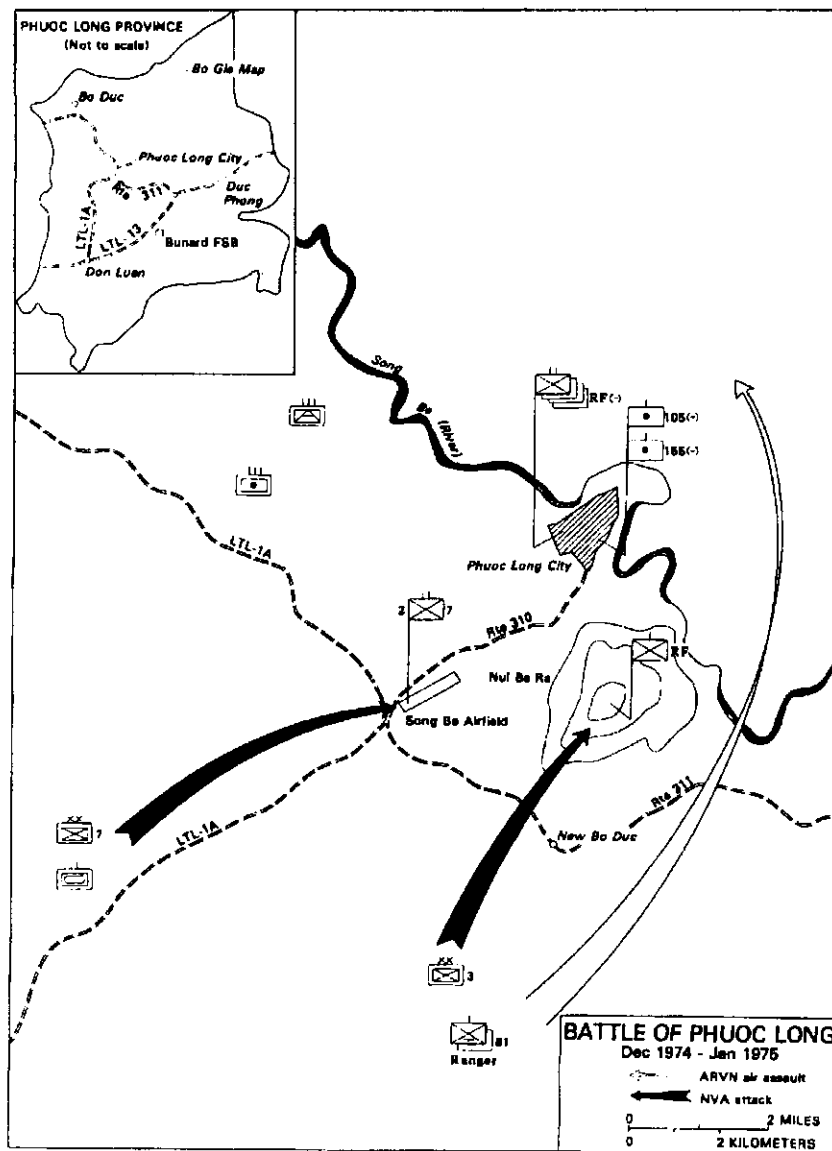
Back in Vietnam, the fighting continued. Between the end of January and July 1973, there were significant battles in Quang Ngai, Kien Phong, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces. This fighting, which became known as the “cease fire war,” continued for the rest of 1973 and into 1974, resulting in 26,500 South Vietnamese soldiers killed in 1973 and almost 30,000 killed the following year.

As the fighting continued into 1974, the South Vietnamese began to experience severe shortages in ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and other war material. As war stocks dwindled and were not replaced, Thieu was relegated to fighting a “poor man’s war.” On 9 August 1974, the South Vietnamese, in the midst of combatting the largest Communist offensive since the cease-fire, were dealt a devastating blow by the resignation of President Nixon. His successor, Gerald Ford, sent assurances that Nixon’s promises of support would be honored, but the new president was not in a position to make these promises fact. This became apparent in October when Congress appropriated only \$700 million in military and economic aid for the year ending 30 June 1975, a significant reduction from the \$1 billion originally requested.⁴ The one-two punch of Nixon’s resignation and the subsequent reduction in military aid had a devastating impact on South Vietnamese morale.

The Politburo in Hanoi, emboldened by Nixon’s demise and the reduction in U.S. military aid to Saigon, decided to launch an attack as a test case to see what the Americans would do if the South Vietnamese got into serious trouble on the battlefield. The target for this attack would be Phuoc Long Province, a relatively lightly held area northwest of Saigon. The attack, conducted by the PAVN 301st Corps, consisting two divisions, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, and local sapper and infantry units, was launched on 13 December (See Map 1). Saigon rushed reinforcements to the area, but they were too little and too late. The battle was over by the first week in January. The North Vietnamese had taken the entire province in just a matter of days. South Vietnamese losses were staggering – of 5,400 ARVN and regional defense forces (RF/PF) committed to the battle, only 850 survived.

The loss of Phuoc Long Province stunned Thieu and the South Vietnamese people. It was the first entire province to fall to the Communists since 1972. Making matters much worse was the lack of any reaction from the United States; President Ford did not even mention Vietnam in his first State of the Union address on 15 January. Moreover, at a press conference a few days later, Ford said that he could foresee no circumstances in which the

MAP 1 — THE BATTLE OF PHUOC LONG PROVINCE



Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 134.

United States would become actively involved in the Vietnam War again.⁵

The South Vietnamese were stunned. Not only had the United States cut them off

materially, now it had publicly disowned them. General Cao Van Vien, former Chairman of Joint General Staff, wrote after the war that Ford's statement shook the South Vietnamese as nothing had since the Tet Offensive in 1968: "The apparent total indifference with which the United States and other non-Communist countries regarded this tragic loss reinforced the doubt the Vietnamese people held concerning the viability of the Paris Agreement. Almost gone was the hope that the United States would forcibly punish the North Vietnamese for their brazen violations of the cease-fire agreement. The people's belief in the power of the armed forces and the government was also deeply shaken."⁶ The fall of Phuoc Long Province demonstrated the impotence of both South Vietnam and the United States and signaled the beginning of a series of events that would ultimately result in the fall of South Vietnam.

The Politburo in Hanoi was almost as surprised as the South Vietnamese at the rapidity of the fall of Phuoc Long and the lack of a response from the American government. The 23rd Plenum was in session in Hanoi when word was received of the victory. The North Vietnamese leaders were jubilant. For the first time since 1972, the PAVN had "liberated" an entire province and rocked the already shaky confidence of the South Vietnamese. The inability of the ARVN to stop the PAVN assault and Ford's inaction and public declaration convinced the North Vietnamese leadership that the time had come to commence the final offensive. Saying, "Never have we had military and political conditions so perfect or a strategic advantage so great as we have now," First Secretary Le Duan directed the military leadership to develop plans to take advantage of the situation.⁷ The result was an ambitious two-year strategy calling for widespread major attacks in the South in 1975 to create the conditions for a general offensive and uprising in 1976.

On 9 January, the day after the 23rd Plenum adjourned, the Central Military Committee and General Staff met in Hanoi to develop detailed plans for the opening phase of the new offensive. The decision was made to focus the initial effort on Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province in the Central Highlands (MR II), where a successful attack would provide staging areas and avenues of approach for a future follow-on attack to seize Pleiku, the most important city in the region. The Politburo approved the plan and ordered General Van Tien Dung to go south to take command of "Campaign 275," as the new offensive was to be called.

In Saigon, Thieu and his generals knew that the North Vietnamese would try to take advantage of their victory in Phuoc Long. The Joint General Staff recommended to Thieu that he

consider a different plan of defense that took into consideration the new situation on the battlefield. They advocated “truncation” or a shortening of the South Vietnamese lines to more defensible positions. However, Thieu refused to even discuss this option, demanding that no territory be given up to the North Vietnamese without a fight. Former Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem maintains that one reason for Thieu’s refusal to discuss a new strategy was that even after having lost Phuoc Long province, the South Vietnamese president continued to hold onto “the belief that the Americans would never tolerate a takeover of South Vietnam by the Communist.”⁸ Such was not to be the case.

Although President Ford tried to get additional funding for military aid to Saigon, the majority of Congress was vehemently against it. In late February 1975, 82 members of the bipartisan Members of Congress for Peace Through Law sent Ford a letter saying that they saw “no humanitarian or national interest” to justify aid to Southeast Asia.⁹

In an attempt to overcome the stiffening resistance to additional aid for Saigon, Ford sent a bipartisan congressional delegation to South Vietnam to assess the military, political, and economic situation. He hoped that this trip would convince the members of the delegation that South Vietnam would fall without additional U.S. aid. Unfortunately, the delegation did not see it Ford’s way. Upon their return to Washington, Representative Paul McCloskey (Republican, California) published a report that concluded that the North Vietnamese would overcome the south within three years no matter what the U.S. did with regard to additional military aid. A week later, the Democratic Caucus in both the House and the Senate voted to oppose any further aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia.

While the debate over military aid continued in Washington, the PAVN made final preparations for the commencement of Campaign 275. In late January, North Vietnamese forces began moving into Darlac province – five main force PAVN infantry divisions, 15 regiments of tanks, artillery, antiaircraft, and engineers – a total of 75,000-80,000 troops. The ARVN were vastly outnumbered; when the battle started at Ban Me Thuot, the ARVN defenders included only one regiment from the 23rd ARVN Division, a ranger group and various regional force units.

Dung’s plan was relatively simple. Diversionary attacks elsewhere in the Central Highlands would draw off ARVN forces from the main point of attack. Then additional forces would sever all access routes into and out of Ban Me Thuot to preclude reinforcement by ARVN forces located along the coast at Pleiku and Nha Trang. Once this had been accomplished, the

main attack would be launched on Ban Me Thuot itself.

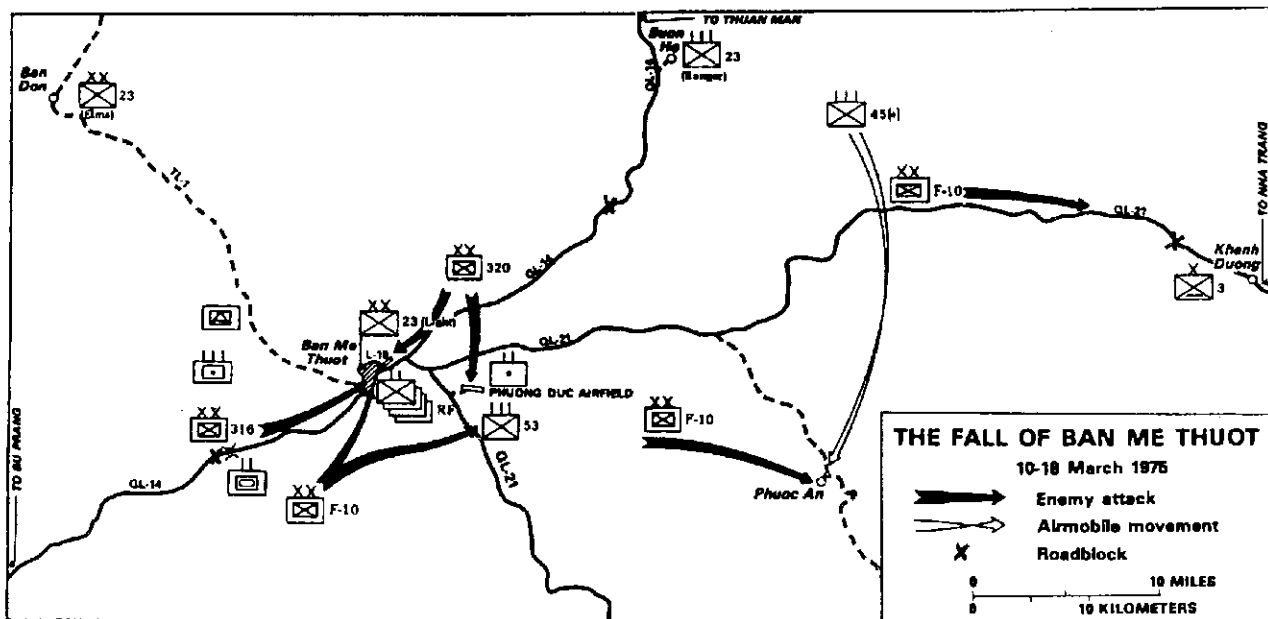
Although ARVN intelligence correctly predicted that the main attack would be directed against Ban Me Thuot, Lieutenant General Pham Van Phu, ARVN II Corps commander, remained convinced that the main attack would be directed at Pleiku or Kontum. Consequently, he did not send reinforcements to Ban Me Thuot when the roads were still open. He eventually sent one regiment, but by then, these forces were not enough because the PAVN forces had closed on the city. The battle began on 4 March when PAVN troops cut Route 19 in two places (See Map 2). On 5 March, additional North Vietnamese forces blocked Route 21 and three days later, a PAVN regiment cut Route 14, thus completing the isolation of Ban Me Thuot. The battle for the city itself began at 0200 hours on 10 March when the PAVN launched a two-pronged, three-division attack. The North Vietnamese succeeded in taking most of the city in the first 48 hours after the main attack commenced.

As the battle in Ban Me Thuot unfolded, President Thieu made a momentous decision. Reeling from the disastrous loss of Phuoc Long and with Darlac province under heavy attack, Thieu came to the conclusion that he had to do something before all was lost. His "hold at all costs" strategy was no longer viable. On 11 March 1975, Thieu met with General Vien of the JGS and Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang, Thieu's assistant for security affairs; he told his generals that RVNAF forces should focus on protecting only the most populous areas deemed most essential, therefore Military Regions III and IV would be held at all costs. This area was to be the "untouchable heartland, the irreducible national stronghold."¹⁰

In MR I south of the DMZ, the mission would be "hold what you can." As for MR II, Thieu ordered that Ban Me Thuot be held (but it was already in the process of falling as this meeting was going on). Then Thieu drew a series of phase lines on the map that indicated how the South Vietnamese forces would withdraw if unable to stand against the PAVN onslaught -- first to Hue, then Da Nang, then to Quang Ngai, then Qui Nhon, and ultimately a final defensive line just north of Tuy Hoa (See Map 3). This strategy, later described as "light at the top, heavy on the bottom" was an attempt at trading space for time.¹¹ Thieu was effectively "truncating" South Vietnam just as his generals had previously recommended. This decision was not a bad one from a purely military standpoint. Seven of ARVN's 13 divisions were deployed in MR's I and II defending only one-fifth of the population. Withdrawal of these forces to the south where 12 million people resided made sense, but it was passed the time to consider such a move.

Withdrawal of forces in contact is one of the most difficult of military maneuvers under the best of

MAP 2 -- THE FALL OF BAN ME THUOT, 10-18 MARCH 1975



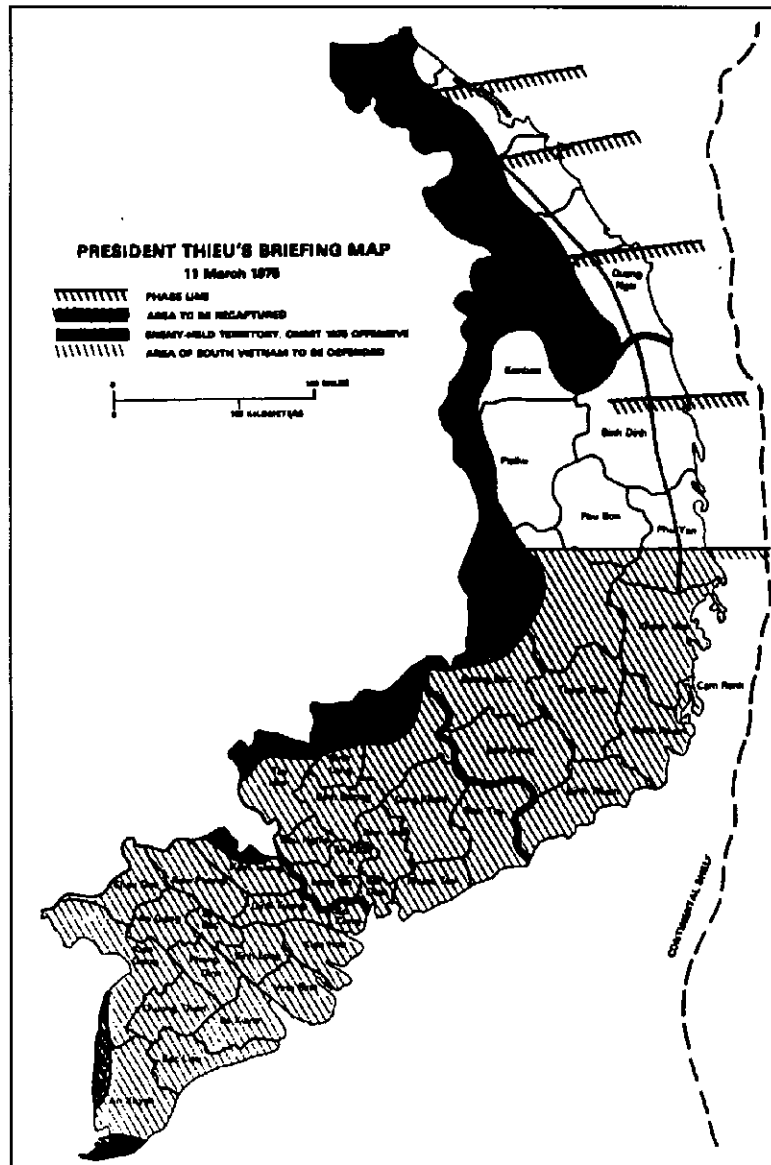
Source: General Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), pp. 70-71.

circumstances; trying to do it at this juncture, poorly planned and even more poorly executed, resulted in wholesale disaster for South Vietnam.

By the evening of 11 March, the PAVN had captured most of Darlac Province, but the remnants of two ARVN battalions still held positions in Ban Me Thuot and alongside the airfield at Phuoc An. In accordance with his new plan, Thieu ordered Lieutenant General Phu, II Corps commander, to retake Ban Me Thuot. The 21st Ranger Group launched the counterattack, which reached the outskirts of the city, but they foundered when Brigadier General Le Van Tuong, commander of the 23rd ARVN Division, halted the rangers and ordered them to secure a landing zone in order to evacuate the general's wife and children by helicopter. The rangers were never able to re-mount the attack, because the PAVN had rushed reinforcements to block them while the rangers were securing the LZ; thus, a perfect opportunity to relieve Ban Me Thuot was lost.

Phu attempted to mount another counterattack, this time by airlifting two regiments into LZ's near Phuoc An airfield. This attack failed because the ARVN could not generate

MAP 3 -- PRESIDENT THIEU'S BRIEFING MAP, 11 MARCH 1975



Source: Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 79.

sufficient combat power on the ground due to maintenance problems with the helicopters that were to take the South Vietnamese troops to Phuoc An. Eventually one regiment and one battalion were landed and made their way toward Phuoc An. However, they were met by devastating fire from reinforced PAVN units blocking their way; the attack fell apart and the

survivors fled east. On 18 March, the PAVN overran the last ARVN positions at Phuoc An – all of Darlac Province had fallen into Communist hands. Unfortunately, the fall of Ban Me Thuot was only a prelude to further disaster.

The rapidity of the South Vietnamese collapse stunned General Dung and his generals. Just as surprising was the fact that the U.S. once again had done nothing to come to the aid of the South Vietnamese. Dung realized that he was very close to cutting South Vietnam in two, isolating RVNAF units at Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and further north in MR I. Attempting to seize the situation, Dung advised Hanoi that he planned to turn his forces north to take Pleiku and Kontum.

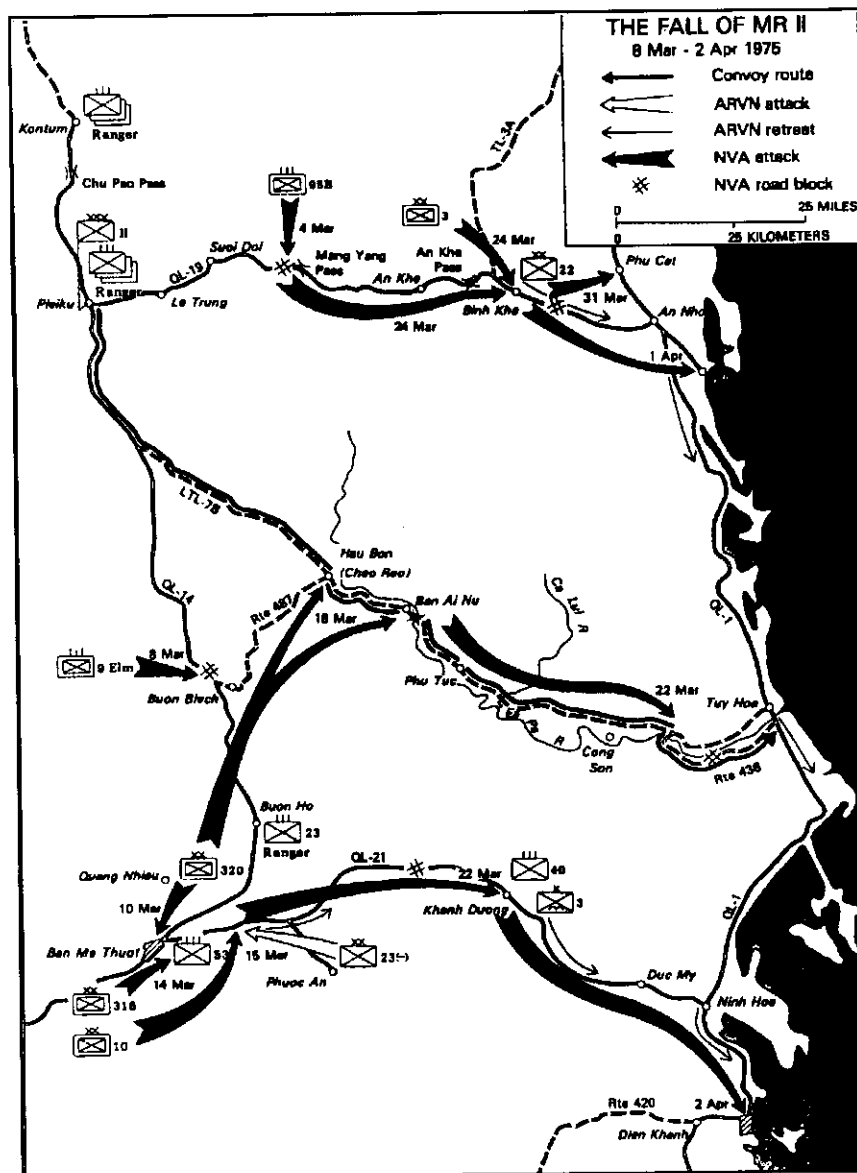
Before Phuoc An fell, Thieu met with General Phu, II Corps commander, at Cam Ranh. The South Vietnamese president explained his new strategy and ordered Phu to retake Ban Me Thuot. Phu asked for reinforcements but was told that he would have to accomplish the mission with the troops he already had and should "redeploy his forces" in accordance with the new strategy to get the forces to do the job. Accordingly, Phu ordered a withdrawal of his forces from Kontum and Pleiku to the sea by way of Route 7, a little-used logging road that ran 200 kilometers southeast from Pleiku to Tuy Hoa on the coast.

This withdrawal of forces, supposedly to reposition for a counterattack against Ban Me Thuot, soon turned into a rout. The chaos began when several commanders in Kontum withdrew without waiting for final orders. Civilians in Kontum, seeing the ARVN headed south, panicked and joined them on the highway.

Things were no better in Pleiku. All semblance of order broke down. Attempts to put together an organized move met with little success. When ARVN soldiers began to blow up ammunition and fuel stockpiles to prevent them from falling into Communist hands, the people panicked and fled down the road with whatever they could carry. The desperation to get out of Pleiku reached new heights when a rumor spread that Thieu had made a deal with Hanoi, whereby he would abandon the northern provinces to the PAVN in exchange for a free hand further south. These rumors were not true, but they added tremendously to the mounting panic. When the first military convoy moved out on the evening of 16 March, the ARVN units became intermingled with the civilians fleeing down Route 7. By 18 March, 200,000 troops and refugees were spread out along the road in what became known as the "convoy of tears." To make matters worse, forward progress was inhibited by the need to stop and repair several bridges along the route.

Meanwhile, General Dung rushed PAVN units to the area and ordered them to take

MAP 4 — THE FALL OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS



Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 148.

up positions along Route 7 (See Map 4). On 18 March, they opened fire on the densely packed soldiers and civilians on the road. The effect was devastating; carnage reigned supreme. Some

units tried to fight back, but the intermingling of soldiers and civilians hampered any meaningful defense. Eventually, unit discipline broke down and the situation deteriorated rapidly. There were mass desertions and roving bands of looters preyed on the civilians. Meanwhile, the PAVN continued to pummel the column with everything they had.

The lead ARVN unit finally broke through the PAVN forces in front of the column on 27 March and reached Tuy Hoa on the coastal highway. However, by this time, the damage was already done. Only about 20,000 of the original 60,000 troops that started out from Kontum and Pleiku survived (for example, of 7,000 rangers, only about 700 escaped).¹² These casualties represented about 75 percent of the II Corps combat strength.¹³ Of the estimated 400,000 civilians who had attempted to flee Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Cheo Reo, only about 60,000-100,000 got through.¹⁴ The South Vietnamese abandoned hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces in Pleiku or along Route 7; nearly 18,000 tons of much needed ammunition was left in depots in Pleiku and Kontum. One former South Vietnamese general later said that the retreat from Pleiku was "the greatest disaster in the history of ARVN."¹⁵ This was not hyperbole -- the South Vietnamese had lost six entire provinces in a very short period of time and with very little fight in most cases.

The impact on the morale of the South Vietnamese was immediate and pervasive; Arnold Isaacs, Saigon correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*, said "there was a feeling that a vital part had come loose...it was impossible to believe that the ARVN would ever again be an army."¹⁶

As bad as was the disaster in II Corps, events unfolding further north in MR I would prove to be even more devastating. The commander of I Corps in MR I was Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, one of Thieu's best field generals. For the first two months in 1975, Truong's forces had done very well against the PAVN. However, with the fall of Ban Me Thuot and the disaster in MR II, President Thieu became convinced that the target of the new PAVN offensive was ultimately Saigon. Therefore, he began to pull forces from I Corps to protect the capital. In March, he ordered General Truong to release the Airborne Division for immediate redeployment to the Saigon area. He then told Truong that he was to hold Da Nang at all costs, implying to Truong at least that the general was to consider the rest of MR I expendable.

Truong began redeploying his forces to defend Da Nang, effectively abandoning Quang Tri to the enemy without a fight. On 18 March, the people in Quang Tri, realizing that they were being abandoned, picked up what they could and headed down the highway. The next day the

PAVN occupied Quang Tri without a fight.

Truong returned to Saigon to confer with Thieu, convincing him that I Corps forces could hold Hue for a time before withdrawing to a stronghold in Da Nang. He then flew back to Da Nang determined to fight a “historic battle.”¹⁷

While Truong had been gone, the situation in Da Nang had gotten much worse; the flow of refugees into the city was gathering speed. The PAVN were pushing the South Vietnamese defenders along the My Chanh River half-way to Hue. Additionally, the PAVN were attacking South Vietnamese forces strung out along Highway 1 south of Hue. By this time, Truong’s forces in MR I were opposed by five main force PAVN division, nine separate infantry regiments, three sapper regiments, three tank regiments, eight artillery regiments, and twelve antiaircraft regiments — the equivalent of nearly nine divisions.

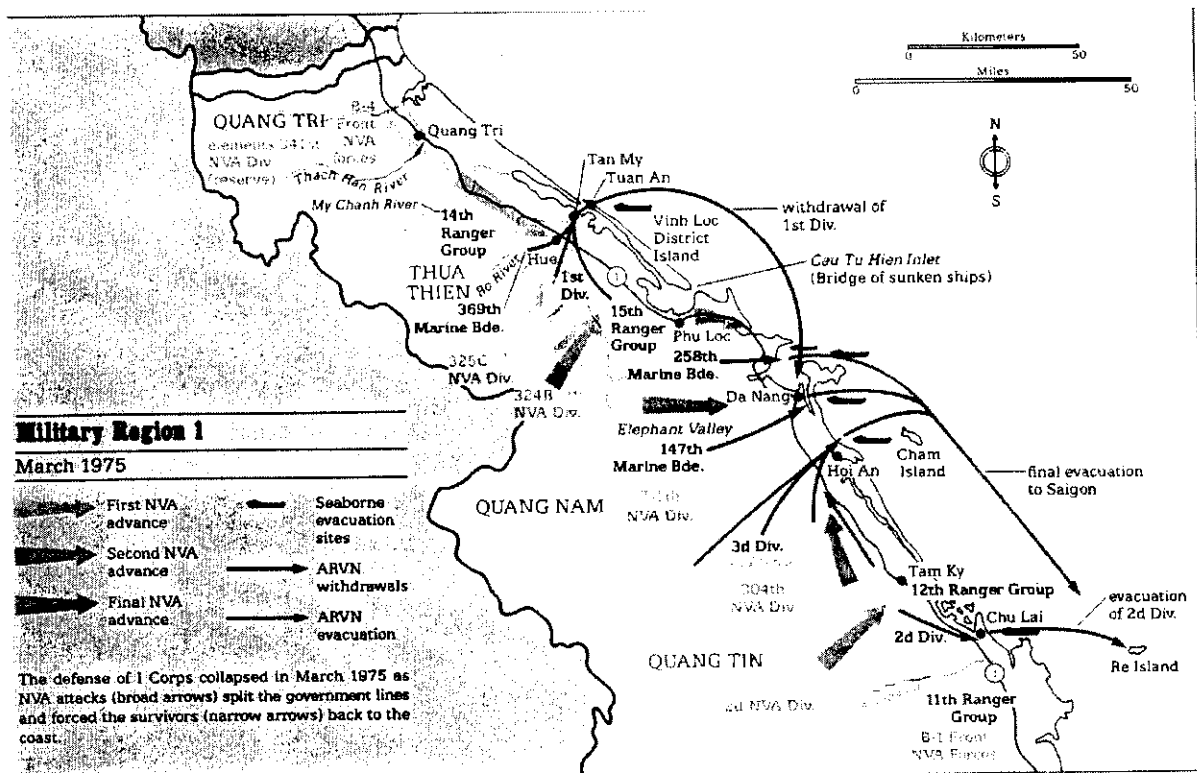
Dung’s plan was to attack the South Vietnamese simultaneously from the north, west, and south to drive Truong’s forces into Da Nang where they could be surrounded and destroyed (See Map 5). This effort was made easier by indecision on the part of Thieu and his subsequent conflicting orders to General Truong. One American observer later said: “It was like a yo-yo. First, Thieu gave the order to pull back and defend Da Nang. Then he countermanded it and ordered that Hue be held. Then he changed his mind again and told the troops to withdraw. A reasonably orderly withdrawal turned into a rout.”¹⁸ The orders to abandon Hue did not sit well with many of the South Vietnamese soldiers, many of whose families lived in the area. One ARVN Brigadier General told his men: “we’ve been betrayed. We have to abandon Hue. It is now *sauve qui peu* [every man for himself]....See you in Da Nang.”¹⁹

The roads to the coast were already overrun with civilian refugees and many ARVN soldiers simply melted into the crowd and began to look for their families. As the South Vietnamese abandoned Hue, the PAVN entered the citadel unopposed. Many soldiers and marines fought valiantly, but confusing orders leading to the abandonment of strong defensive positions demoralized the troops. Poor leadership, the disintegration of unit integrity and discipline, and concern over family members quickly led to panic and total chaos.

Meanwhile, PAVN forces attacked south of Da Nang with the intention of isolating the city as other units increased the pressure on Da Nang from three sides. By this time, the city of 300,000 was inundated with nearly two million refugees from Quang Tri, Hue, and Quang Tin, all clamoring to get out. A high ranking officer from I Corps said later that Da Nang was “seized by

convulsions of collective hysteria.”²⁰ Major General Homer Smith,

MAP 5 — MILITARY REGION I, MARCH 1975



Source: Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 69.

head of the U.S. Defense Attache Office, reported that “the pandemonium which overtook reason in Da Nang, literally wrested control of the city from all official presence.”²¹ An attempt to stage a massive airlift from Da Nang failed when hordes of refugees and deserters overran the airfield and mobbed the airplanes as they tried to take off.

At dawn on 29 March, as PAVN artillery shelled the city, the evacuation of Da Nang began. Thousands of soldiers and civilians ran for the sea where they drowned trying to reach the safety of the rescue ships. Thousands of others died under the continuous artillery fire. On 30 March, the PAVN occupied Da Nang, thereby assuming control of Military Region I in its entirety.

The fall of Da Nang was a costly defeat for the South Vietnamese. Approximately 6,000 Marines and 4,000 ARVN escaped, but nearly 100,000 others were killed or captured during the

fall of Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang. Only about 50,000 of the two million refugees made it out. One observer remarked that “Da Nang was not captured; it disintegrated in its own terror.”²²

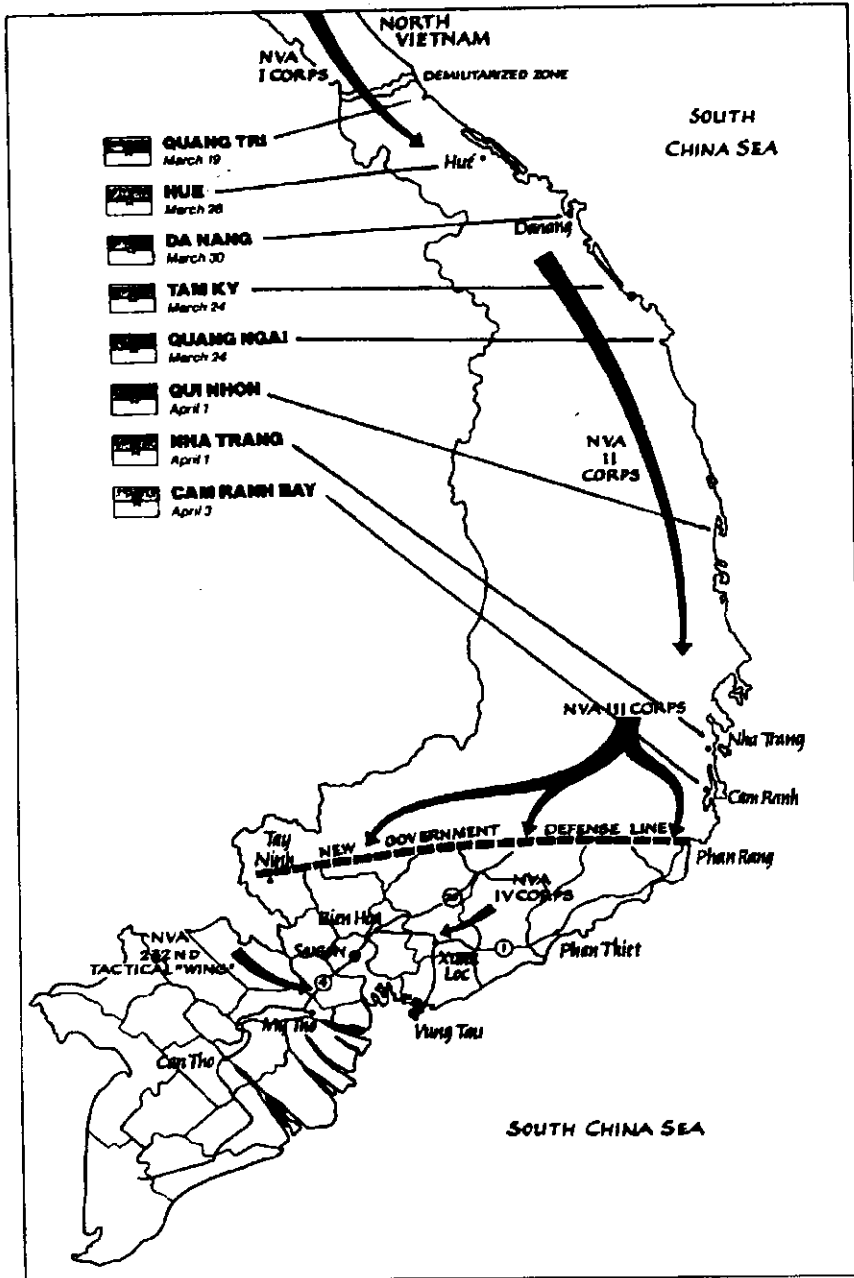
By 1 April, the PAVN held all of MR's I and II and had destroyed the preponderance of two ARVN corps, which was over one-half of ARVN's effective fighting strength. One division, the 22nd ARVN, managed to hold out for awhile in MR II, controlling the three cities of Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang, but eventually they were overwhelmed by the numbers of PAVN forces thrown against them (See Map 6).

The loss of MR's I and II rocked South Vietnam to its very foundation. The loss of Da Nang, South Vietnam's second largest city, was, in the words of Deputy Premier Dr. Phan Quang Dan, “the worst disaster in the history of South Vietnam.”²³ He was not wrong and the fall of Da Nang signaled the beginning of the end for South Vietnam.

The Ford administration was shocked by the suddenness of the South Vietnamese collapse in the northern half of the country. In an attempt to bolster Thieu's morale, Ford sent him a letter assuring him of Ford's “continued firm support” and of his resolve to do everything he could to help the Republic of Vietnam.²⁴ To deliver the letter, Ford dispatched Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand as his personal representative to Saigon, who was charged to make a first-hand assessment of the situation. He arrived on 27 March and assured Thieu of Ford's “steadfast support.”²⁵ After a whirlwind tour, Weyand returned to Washington and reported that South Vietnam was on the brink of a total military defeat unless something was done. He recommended that the president submit a supplemental military aid request to Congress for \$722 million to replace the material lost in MR's I and II. Weyand said this material would not only help Thieu to hold Saigon, but it would also provide a much needed psychological boost to the South Vietnamese during their darkest hour.

This was not to be because the president would not be able to convince Congress to provide the necessary funds. Ford had angered many in Congress in a speech on 3 April in which he intimated that the fall of South Vietnam would be Congress' fault and that the American lives lost in Vietnam would be wasted because Congress refused to honor commitments made by himself and Richard Nixon. Many legislators believed that the U.S. had no compunction to honor any secret agreements made by Richard Nixon and were not receptive to any additional requests for aid; Senator Richard Byrd spoke for many of his colleagues when he said, “Some commitments are invented where no commitments exist,

MAP 6 — LOSS OF THE COAST, MARCH-APRIL 1975



Source: Adapted from Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 384 and Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 274.

and then Congress is blamed for not living up to those commitments.”²⁶

Nevertheless, Ford went before a joint session of Congress on 10 April to plead for the military aid supplement for Saigon. He found a very hostile audience; not one clap of applause greeted Ford’s appeal and two Democrats even walked out in the middle of his speech. Events in Cambodia did not help Ford’s case; two hours before he was scheduled to speak to Congress, Ambassador John Gunther Dean cabled from Phnom Penh requesting approval for the final evacuation of Americans from the Cambodian capital. Aware that Cambodia was falling and believing that Saigon would not be far behind, Congress denied Ford’s supplemental aid request.

On 3 April, General Dung arrived at his new command post at Loc Ninh, only 60 miles north of Saigon. Shortly thereafter, he received new orders from the Politburo in Hanoi, which had determined that it would not be necessary to wait to 1976 for the knock-out blow. Dung was ordered to make a great leap forward to seize a “once in a thousand years opportunity to liberate Saigon before the rainy season.” The new offensive was to be called the “Ho Chi Minh Campaign.” He was told, “You must win. Otherwise, do not return.”²⁷ Responding to these orders, Dung pushed his forces rapidly down the coast. Massive columns of troops, equipment, and vehicles, many of which had been captured from the South Vietnamese, moved down Highway 1 toward Saigon.

By this time, the North Vietnamese general had sixteen infantry divisions supported by tanks, artillery, sappers, and antiaircraft units organized into five corps. Thieu, on the other hand had lost a large part of his army and the surviving South Vietnamese forces were greatly outnumbered. Moreover, they were a demoralized force facing an opponent that was riding the high tide of victory. The fortunes of Thieu and his nation had fallen so low that on 8 April, one of his own VNAF pilots flew an F-5E in two bombing runs on Thieu’s Independence Palace.

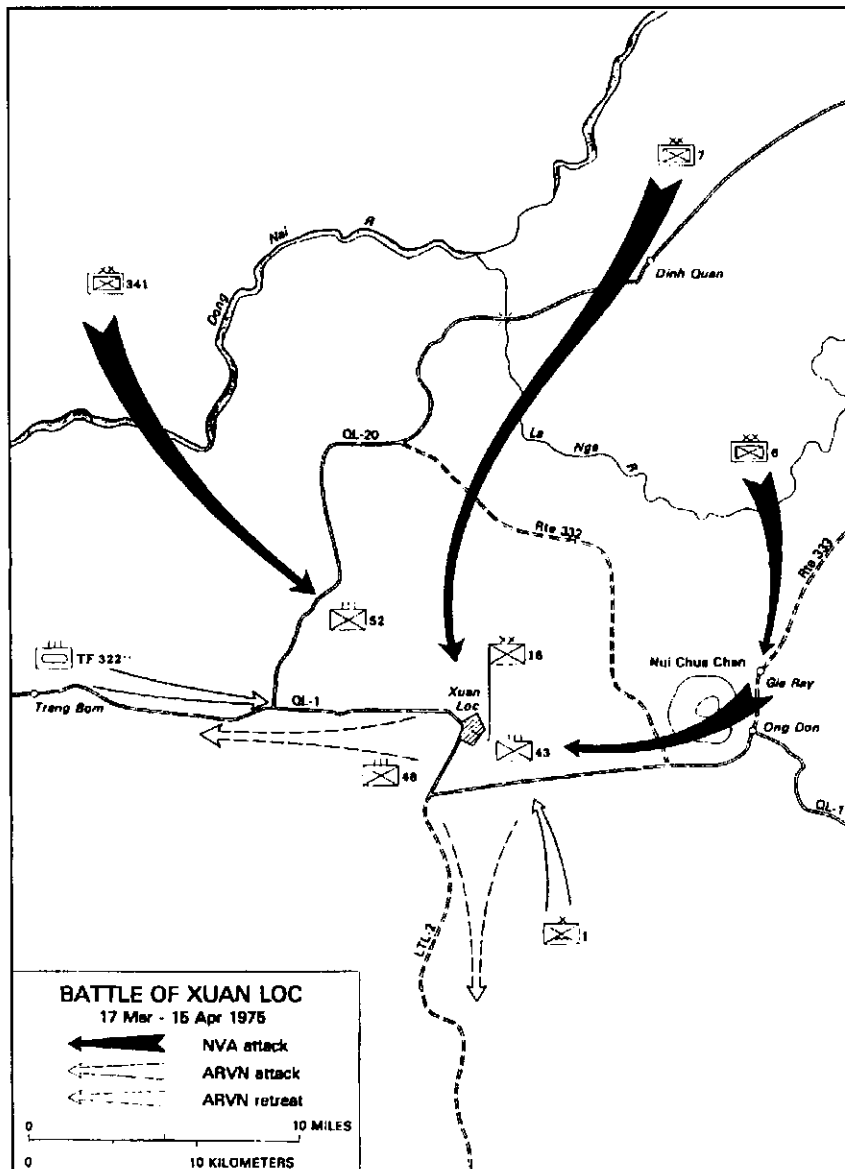
The PAVN plan for the Ho Chi Minh Campaign called for the 4th Army Corps to make the main attack on Saigon from the east along Route 1 (See Map 7). The 232nd Tactical Force, a recently formed corps-size formation, was to attack south of Saigon to tie down the ARVN forces in the Mekong Delta. The 3rd Army Corps would press the attack against Tay Ninh to the northwest of Saigon to tie down the 25th ARVN so it could not reinforce the city.

As Dung’s forces prepared for the attack, Thieu surveyed the South Vietnamese troops available for the defense of the capital. These comprised three divisions (5th, 18th, and 25th) in ARVN III Corps and three in IV Corps (7th, 9th, and 21st) plus remnants of the Marine and

Province, but would be moved to the city as the battle developed.

The initial battles in the Long Khanh-Binh Tuy region began on 17 March when the 209th Infantry and 210th Artillery Regiments of the 7th NVA Division struck first at Dinh

MAP 8 — THE BATTLE OF XUAN LOC



Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 168.

Quan, north of Xuan Loc, and at the La Nga bridge, west of Dinh Quan (See Map 8). The fighting was intense; eight tanks supported the initial assault and NVA artillery fire destroyed four 155mm howitzers supporting the defenders. Anticipating the attack, General Le Minh Dao,

commander of the 18th, had reinforced the La Nga bridge the day before, but the intense fire forced the defenders to withdraw with heavy losses.

At the same time, another outpost of Xuan Loc District, Ong Don, to the east of the city, came under heavy attack, but the defenders were able to repulse the Communists. General Dao sent reinforcements to Ong Don while another outpost at Gia Ray came under a new attack. Dao realized that two NVA divisions, the 6th and the 7th, were committed to the fight for Long Khanh Province and were apparently trying to block any reinforcements to Xuan Loc from the east and north.

General Dao decided to counterattack north up Route 20 with his 52nd Regiment reinforced with the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron from Tay Ninh Province. He ordered the regiment to clear the road as far as Dinh Quan, but the attack quickly stalled as it met heavy resistance well short of its objective. Meanwhile, Hoai was overrun by the 812th Regiment of the 6th NVA Division and the ARVN outpost on Chua Chan mountain also fell to elements of the same division. It was clear that the North Vietnamese were maneuvering additional forces to make a direct attack on Xuan Loc, which had begun to receive heavy artillery fire. In preparation for the coming battle, General Nguyen Van Toan, commanding III Corps, returned the 48th Regiment to General Dao. By 1 April, elements of Dao's division were involved in intense fighting all around Xuan Loc, but were holding their own against the Communist attackers. Thus, the first attempt to take Xuan Loc was repulsed by the South Vietnamese defenders.

On 9 April, the North Vietnamese renewed their efforts to take Xuan Loc. The 341st NVA Division launched the main attack on the city from the northwest following a 4,000 round mortar, artillery, and rocket barrage, which set a large part of the city on fire. Attacking with T-54 tanks, the North Vietnamese troops pushed toward the heart of the city. The South Vietnamese fought desperately, often engaging in hand to hand fighting, but by dusk, the Communists held the police station, the CIA compound, the railway station, and the local Ranger base.

On the morning of April 10, the ARVN forces counterattacked, causing the PAVN to yield ground. Major General Le Trong An, the North Vietnamese corps commander, ordered reserve regiments from the 6th and 7th NVA Divisions into the fight, but the ARVN doggedly fought back, holding on to their positions in and around Xuan Loc. In the battles that lasted into the next day, the South Vietnamese inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. General Dung,

senior North Vietnamese commander, who had become accustomed to gaining ground without a fight, was impressed with “the enemy’s stubbornness.”²⁸

The JGS saw that Dao and his troops had a chance to stop the North Vietnamese onslaught and rushed reinforcements from the 25th ARVN Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade to Long Khan Province. There were now more than 25,000 ARVN troops committed to the defense of Xuan Loc, almost a third of what remained of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

With VNAF flying close support, the soldiers of the 18th ARVN began to get the upper hand in the battle. Encouraged by the determined resistance of the South Vietnamese, General Smith sent a message to the Joint Chiefs, declaring that the South Vietnamese “had won round one” of the battle for Xuan Loc. He lauded the “valor and aggressiveness of GVN troops” and concluded that their performance “appears to settle for the time being the question, ‘Will ARVN fight?’”²⁹

The North Vietnamese attack resumed on 13 April. By this time, seven NVA regiments had been committed to the battle. The attack began at 0450 and lasted until 0930. Once again, the South Vietnamese troops put up a stubborn defense with the help of the Vietnamese Air Force, which flew continuous close air support against intense antiaircraft fire. The North Vietnamese attackers were forced to withdraw, leaving 235 dead and about 30 weapons on the battlefield. The attack picked up again around noon and continued until late afternoon, but still the South Vietnamese held.

Meanwhile, General Dung, not wanting to get tied down in a battle on the periphery of Saigon, urged his forces to redouble their efforts to annihilate the defenders. Elements of the 341st, 6th, and 7th NVA Divisions would continue to pin down the ARVN forces inside Xuan Loc, while the rest of Dung’s forces would eliminate the city’s outer defenses. He ordered two regiments from the 6th Division to destroy the 52nd ARVN Regiment on Route 20 and sent the armor-supported 95B Regiment to attack ARVN positions to the west along Route 1 between Xuan Loc and Bien Hoa. At the same time, he directed the recently arrived Artillery Group 75 to train its long-range guns on Bien Hoa to to “paralyze” the VNAF and keep their aircraft on the ground. Additionally, Dung ordered 2nd Army Corps, which was in the process of taking Phan Rang, to continue south along the coast to seize Phan Thiet, then swing westward to hit Xuan Loc from that direction if the South Vietnamese still held the city by the time they got there.

The battles that ensued were hard fought on both sides. The 18th ARVN Division, which

had suffered 30 percent casualties, fought valiantly, but by 15 April, sheer numbers and superior firepower turned the tide. The South Vietnamese troops – outnumbered, running low on ammunition, and thoroughly exhausted – could no longer hold against the North Vietnamese onslaught. General Dao, despite his well-publicized vow to “hold Xuan Loc” at all costs no matter “how many regiments they throw against me,” was forced to begin evacuating his forces from inside the city.³⁰ On 16 April, helicopters extracted the survivors of the 43rd Regiment. That same day, the NVA finally overran the 52nd Regiment, which by this time had lost 70 percent of its original strength.

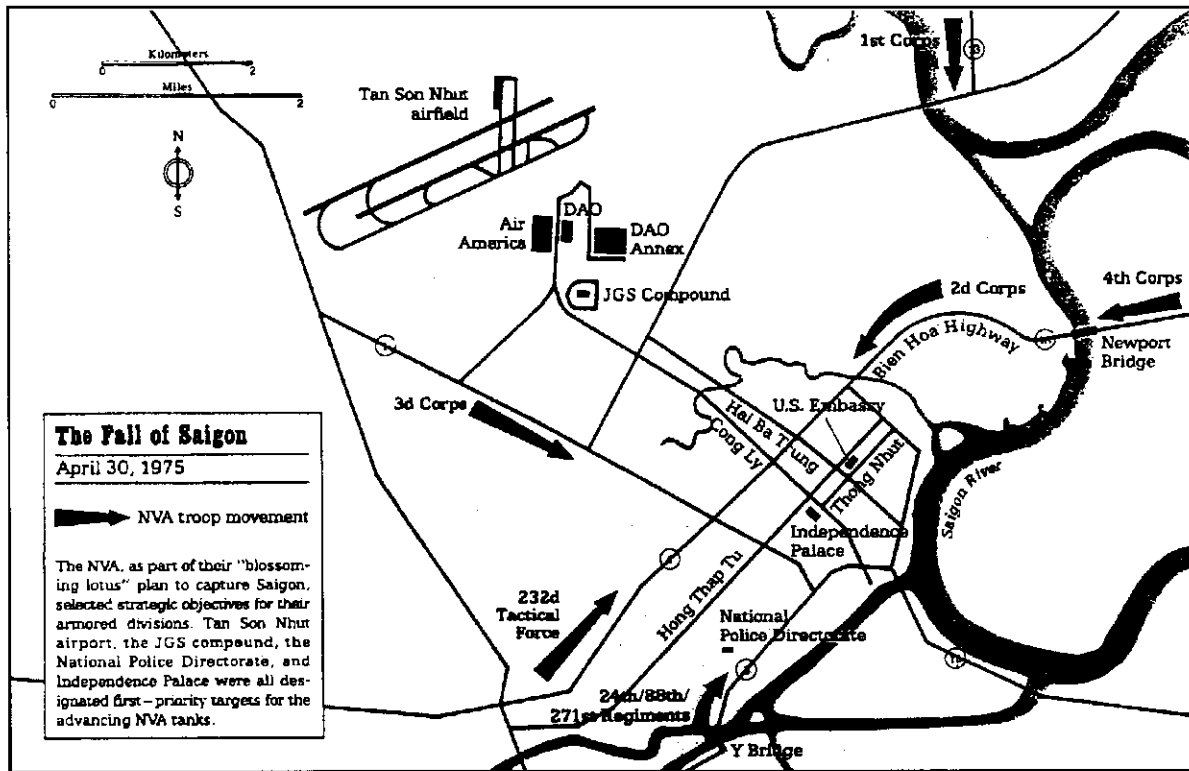
The North Vietnamese had taken Xuan Loc in what would prove to be the last major battle of the war; after Xuan Loc fell, there was nothing between the North Vietnamese forces and Saigon. According to Colonel William E. Le Gro, a member of the Saigon DAO who watched the battle at Xuan Loc unfold, the South Vietnamese had fought “splendidly,” forcing the PAVN high command to use the battle as a “meat grinder,” sacrificing its own units to destroy irreplaceable ARVN forces.³¹ The 18th ARVN had held out for three weeks against overwhelming odds, destroying thirty-seven NVA tanks and killing over 5,000 attackers in the process. Lieutenant General Philip B. Davidson wrote after the war: “The battle for Xuan Loc produced one of the epic battles of any of the Indochina Wars, certainly the most heroic stand in Indochina War III ...In this final epic stand ARVN demonstrated for the last time that, when properly led, it had the right stuff.”³² Had the rest of the South Vietnamese fought as valiantly as the 18th ARVN Division, the outcome of the war might have been drastically different. However, such was not the case. Xuan Loc was the last major battle and the PAVN moved quickly on Saigon itself.

While the South Vietnamese fought desperately in the last battle at Xuan Loc, another last battle was being fought in Congress. On 18 April, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted not to approve Ford’s final supplemental aid request — the U.S. had effectively washed its hands of the situation in Vietnam. Time had run out on Nguyen Van Thieu; he had finally realized that his benefactors in Washington were going to allow him to go down in defeat. On 21 April, Thieu, after an impassioned speech in which he vilified the United States for failing to live up to its commitment, announced his resignation and turned over the government to Vice President Tran Van Huong.

By 27 April, PAVN troops had completely surrounded Saigon. At dawn on 28 April,

PAVN commandos from 4th Army Corps took the far end of the Newport Bridge, only five kilometers from the center of Saigon. At 5:15 p.m. that afternoon, President Huong stepped down and turned the government over to Duong Van (Big) Minh. Some South Vietnamese legislators hoped that Minh could negotiate with the communists, but the

MAP 9 — THE FALL OF SAIGON



Source: Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 161.

PAVN, sensing that final victory was in their grasp at last, refused to discuss negotiations.

In the early morning hours of 29 April, the PAVN began a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut air base. Meanwhile PAVN units maneuvered to their final attack positions around the city (See Map 9). Just after 5:00 a.m. on the morning of 30 April, Ambassador Graham Martin, carrying the furled American flag that he had taken from the Embassy, departed by CH-46 helicopter for the *U.S.S. Blue Ridge* standing off the coast in the South China Sea thereby officially ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam.³³

At 10:24 a.m., President Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Vietnam. By noon, Dung's tanks from the 2nd army corps rumbled through the outskirts of Saigon and rolled into the city center unimpeded, followed by open trucks filled with heavily armed and cheering PAVN soldiers. One column of tanks rolled down Thong Nhut Avenue across Cong Ly Boulevard and crashed through the gates of Independence Palace. The war was over.

There is no doubt that the South Vietnamese were decisively defeated in the field during the actions of 1974-1975. There are a myriad of reasons for this defeat: poor leadership, both tactically and at the highest levels of government, desertion, cowardice in the face of the enemy, and ultimately the disintegration of the South Vietnamese armed forces as a fighting force. However, the United States deserves a large part of the blame as well. Nguyen Van Thieu had signed the Paris Accords only at the urging and under the threats of Richard Nixon. This agreement left over 150,000 enemy troops in South Vietnamese territory. In order to get Thieu to agree to the Accords, Richard Nixon sent him a series of over thirty letters promising military aid and support to Saigon if the North Vietnamese attempted to take advantage of their position in the south after the cease-fire. Thieu signed, but once the PAVN made their move, the U.S. failed to provide the promised support. The failure to honor those commitments dealt a devastating blow to South Vietnamese morale and fighting spirit. Without the continued support and backing of their ally, the South Vietnamese ceased to function as a cogent fighting force and collapsed in 55 days. The final battle may have been fought at Xuan Loc, but its outcome was all but predetermined by the Paris Peace Accords and the failure of the United States to live up to its commitment to South Vietnam. One can only wonder what would have transpired if the United States had not agreed to leaving the North Vietnamese troops in the south and/or had provided the promised support when the PAVN began their final offensive in 1974-75. That, however, was not the case and the results were calamitous, both for the Republic of Vietnam, which ceased to exist as a nation, and the United States, which lost the first war in its history.

ENDNOTES

1. William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam From Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 2. This number did not include an estimated 100,000 regular troops in Laos and Cambodia.
2. Message, Bunker to Kissinger, 2 Mar 73, NSC Convenience Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, NARA.
3. Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 163; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 315.
4. The total amount was also to cover all shipping, as well as the operational costs of the U.S. Defense Attache Office in Saigon, thereby leaving only \$500 million for the South Vietnamese.
5. Gerald R. Ford, *Public Papers of the President of the United States, 1975* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 56.
6. Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), 67-68.
7. Quoted in Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 22.
8. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, p. 28. The authors also maintain, p. 30, that according to PRG Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang, Thieu's faith in the Americans was due to the "ingrained Confucianism" of Vietnamese culture: "Among the very deepest feelings on one raised in a Confucian society is the inhibition against betraying those with whom one enjoys a relationship of trust...[Thieu was] betting on the American geopolitical investment in South Vietnam...a relationship of personal commitment had been created. Trapped in his Vietnamese habits of thought, Thieu imagined that this relationship must prevail, regardless of apparent political realities and logic."
9. Letter, Members of Congress for Peace Through Law to Ford, 6 Feb 1975, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
10. The description of this fateful meeting comes from Vien, *Final Collapse*, pp. 77-82.
11. Rowland Edwards and Robert Novak, "Why the Vietnamese Collapsed," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1975.
12. Stephen T. Hosmer, Konran Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1978), p. 96; Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 95.
13. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 95.
14. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Last Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 259.
15. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 96.

16. Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 345.
17. Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, p. 272.
18. "The Anatomy of a Battle," *Time*, 14 April 1975, pp. 16-17.
19. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 109.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
21. Homer D. Smith, "The Final Forty-Five Days in Vietnam," Unpublished paper, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 22 May 1975, p. 6.
22. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 363.
23. "Growing Gloom in a Shrunken Land," *Time*, 7 Apr 1975, pp. 28-33.
24. Letter from Forn to Thieu, 25 March 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
25. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
26. "Seeking the Last Exit from Vietnam," *Time*, 21 Apr 1975, p. 8.
27. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 113.
28. Van Tien Dung, *Out Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 80.
29. Message, Smith to CJCS, 13 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
30. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 130.
31. Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, pp. 173. Although VNAF had done an admirable job in the early phases of the battle for Xuan Loc, a large part of the NVA victory was due to the degradation of VNAF close air support caused by extremely accurate artillery fire which continued to fall on Bien Hoa air base, damaging six F-5A fighters and fourteen A-37 Dragonfly fighter-bombers and seriously curtailing air operations from the base. The South Vietnamese, already greatly outnumbered, were unable to hold their positions in the absence of effective close air support.
32. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946 – 1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 709-710.
33. Operation FREQUENT WIND had been ordered two days earlier by President Ford. During this operation, U.S. helicopters airlifted some 7,100 American and South Vietnamese military and civilian personnel out of Saigon, many of them from the roof of the American Embassy. Navy ships ferried more than 70,000 South Vietnamese to American vessels in the South China Sea. In one of the many tragedies of the war, the Americans left behind 420 South Vietnamese who had worked for them and had been promised evacuation. Colonel Harry Summers, an Army officer assigned to the U.S. Embassy, later wrote that this incident was "a shameful day to be an American" and that the evacuation of the embassy was "the Vietnam War writ small."